

A LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER



It is not surprising, I suppose, that we have dedicated this issue of SPAN to presidents of the United States of America—and especially to the 44th president, Barack Obama.

On January 20, America completed the transfer of power to a new government after a very long and hard-fought election campaign. While this process has been honored in the United States for 220 years, since the inauguration of our first president, George Washington, Americans and people around the world have commented on the many simultaneous challenges facing the new president and wish him success.

This Inauguration Day was exceptional also because Barack Obama became the first African American president of the United States in a national celebration that put an end, at last, to the question of whether Americans could accept a black president. No one will ever ask that again and we hope it will not be long before people wonder what all the fuss was about. But the answer came through clearly on Inauguration Day: “Yes, we can!”

Historical resonances abound. It was only 40 years ago that America’s great dreamer of racial equality, civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., asked whether it might be possible for his young children to be judged “not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” President Obama’s inauguration was celebrated the day after a national holiday commemorating what would have been King’s 80th birthday.

President Obama’s inauguration took place just a few weeks before the 200th birthday of President Abraham Lincoln, who brought an end to slavery in America in the struggle to build “a more perfect Union.” At his inauguration, President Obama took the same oath of office as George Washington and all of his successors; he placed his hand on the same Bible used at President Lincoln’s inauguration.

In January, here in India we marked the 50th year of service by the iconic Embassy of the United States in Chanakyapuri, New Delhi. The historic modern structure designed by Edward Durell Stone was hailed in its day as an artistic achievement and later became the model for The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.

In February, we intend to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the visit to India by Martin Luther King, Jr. He called it “a pilgrimage,” to study the life and work of Mohandas K. Gandhi in India’s freedom struggle, which was adapted and used effectively in the American civil rights movement. “The destiny of the United States is tied up with the destiny of India and the destiny of every other nation,” King said during his visit to Mumbai. We agree and are presenting in this issue historic photographs and an article by Laurinda Keys Long on that journey through India.

President Obama has said that he looks on Gandhi as an inspiration, too, “because he embodies the kind of transformational change that can be made when ordinary people come together to do extraordinary things.” Until his official photograph gets to us in the mail, we will be using a photo of the president in his former Senate office, with photos of Lincoln, King and Gandhi on the wall behind him.

In this SPAN we are also including articles on Presidents Lincoln and Washington and on the changes and traditions of Inauguration Day by Richa Varma. For fun, take a look at the answers to our presidential quiz from the last issue, with some odd and interesting facts about American presidents, our “50 Years Ago” feature by Deepanjali Kakati, as well as the article by Laurence Glasco on how our new president has inspired popular songs around the world.

But there is a lot more in this month’s SPAN: You will also read about a new American opera based on the Bhagavad Gita, a very entertaining Indian American comedian, innovations in health care and the pleasures of Santa Catalina Island, off the California coast. Indians who enjoy this country’s great tradition of puppet dramas will be pleased to know that Americans also have adopted and adapted the art and built the world’s largest puppetry museum. Let us know what you think!